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FM AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8974
INFO RUEHHAH/AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT PRIORITY 2359
RUEHTA/AMEMBASSY ASTANA PRIORITY 0135
RUEHKB/AMEMBASSY BAKU PRIORITY 0138
RUEHEK/AMEMBASSY BISHKEK PRIORITY 4174
RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE PRIORITY
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL PRIORITY 7092
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 5584
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 0892
RUEHFRA/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 4732
RUEHNT/AMEMBASSY TASHKENT PRIORITY 3092
RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI PRIORITY 5911
RUEHLH/AMCONSUL LAHORE PRIORITY 2245
RUEHPW/AMCONSUL PESHAWAR PRIORITY 0561
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUMICEA/USCENTCOM INTEL CEN MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 2278
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/Joint STAFF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 ISLAMABAD 002067

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/08/2017

TAGS: ASEC PGOV PK PREL

SUBJECT: MUSHARRAF'S CHANGED POLITICAL SITUATION: LESS
LATITUDE BUT STILL IN CONTROL

REF: A. ISLAMABAD 1846

B. ISLAMABAD 1844

Classified By: Charge Peter Bodde 1.5 (b), (d).

¶1. (S) Two months in, observers, including some of President Musharraf's main supporters and advisors, believe that the Chief Justice controversy has inflicted political harm on the President. Musharraf's political position is now more fragile. We continue to agree with the prevailing informed opinion - held across the political spectrum - that the government is not in any immediate danger of falling. That said, Musharraf's advisors tell us the President cannot afford further setbacks until the Chief Justice issue is resolved.

¶2. (S) A number of Members of the National Assembly and Senators from the ruling Pakistan Muslim League tell us they are reluctant to support President Musharraf publicly. Some are even refusing to appear at a May 12 pro-Musharraf rally in Islamabad. Sheikh Waqqas Akram, Parliamentary Secretary for Economic Affairs, is one of the few PML officials still vociferously supporting Musharraf. Akram, who is in his 30s and new to the Assembly, told us on May 7 that Musharraf's most important political supporters have publicly distanced themselves from the President. While Akram is optimistic he and others will be able to ensure a sizable turnout for the May 12 rally, the event will draw far fewer than the 200,000 protesters PML President Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain had hoped for (Ref B).

¶3. (S) Musharraf's problems with his supporters are not ideological; they are purely political. The weaker the President appears politically, the more people around him hedge their bets by fence-sitting or even hinting they might jump to another party. (Note: Likewise, should the President rebound from his current political position by finding a publicly acceptable resolution to the Chief Justice controversy, his supporters would likely quickly return to

his side. End Note.) Musharraf is being exceptionally cautious. His sensitive handling of the Red Mosque controversy (Ref A), while largely influenced by the moral imperative of not causing the deaths of women and girls, was also an acknowledgment that, while he has weathered storms of collateral damage and civilian deaths before, he felt he would be less able to withstand significant public outcry in his present circumstance.

¶4. (S) Musharraf's political opponents are also speaking about the President's predicament - and sometimes with more worry than glee. Abdullah Riar, a former Senator and a confidante of Benazir Bhutto, told us May 8 that the protesters at the May 5 demonstrations in Lahore were chanting "While GHQ (Army headquarters) is doing its plundering, you and I go hungry." While Riar did not worry about another coup, he did worry that the Army could quietly pull its important political support from Musharraf if the Army believed association with Musharraf hurt its image. (Note: Based on our close contact with a wide range of the Pakistan military, we believe Musharraf's support from the military remains strong. End Note.)

¶5. (S) Many circles are providing Musharraf advice. Culture Minister GG Jamal told us May 8 he has told the President that a major pro-democracy move, such as removing his uniform, would extinguish the Chief Justice controversy overnight. Others, such as Shujaat and Musharraf's legal advisors, have encouraged a face-saving compromise with the Chief Justice. Akram, the young PML Member of the National Assembly, admits some in the party are examining the possibility of declaring a state of emergency and postponing elections, though most Musharraf supporters say that such a

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move would be a "disaster" for Musharraf, both internationally and with his core constituency. Musharraf himself has told us he would only ever consider a state of emergency if a major regional incident, such as a war in Iran, were to occur.

¶6. (S) Comment: Musharraf's people are worried. While some of the current political maneuvering can be attributed to the predictable dynamics of South Asian politics, Musharraf's advisors believe he cannot afford another political misstep as they move into campaign season - not to mention into the hot summer months that historically increase public frustration with Pakistan's widespread electricity and water shortages. In addition, given Musharraf's close association with us, United States activities (such as statements of senior U.S. officials, Legislative actions, and military activities), which are always closely scrutinized, will have an even greater impact than usual. It is, perhaps, ironic, that some of Musharraf's greatest accomplishments - a relatively free press, a developing civil society, and a booming economy - have enabled public outcry over the Chief Justice issue. End Comment.

BODDE